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AN AMERICAN ART INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN IN PARIS: A LETTER FROM LOUIS J. RHEAD ♣ BY J. M. BOWLES



LOUIS J. RHEAD, the well-known poster designer, has sent in a protest against the proposed establishment on a large scale in Paris of a home for American girls who are studying art. The fact that I print his letter in *Modern Art* does not mean that I myself am yet prepared to discourage the movement. Neither in this case nor in any other does the appearance of a radical paper in my pages imply my unqualified indorsement of every argument it contains. The standpoint of Mr. Rhead, that of an English artist who has adopted America as his home, makes his opinion on the subject interesting. It at least raises the question as to how far we should encourage our young students of art in their studying and living abroad.

The story of the enterprise is outlined in the following dispatch in the *New York Sun* of December 10, 1895:

AMERICAN NATIONAL INSTITUTE.

TO ENABLE AMERICAN WOMEN TO STUDY THE LIBERAL ARTS IN PARIS.

ALBANY, December 9.—The American National Institute filed a certificate of incorporation with the Secretary of State today. The objects for which it is formed are the establishment and maintenance of an institution in Paris, France, founded and organized by Miss Matilda Smedley, of New York City, for the study and cultivation of the liberal arts by American women, and, under suitable restrictions, by other English-speaking women. The institute is to operate in New York City and in Paris.

Farther details appeared in the *New York Tribune* of an earlier date:

ART FOR AMERICAN WOMEN.

AN INSTITUTE FOR THE BENEFIT OF STUDENTS IN PARIS.

SUCCESS OF MISS MATILDA SMEDLEY'S PROJECT FOR THE FOUNDING OF SUCH AN ESTABLISHMENT—MANY WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE INTERESTED IN THE PLAN—WHAT THE INSTITUTE WILL DO FOR OCCIDENTALS IN THE FRENCH CAPITAL.

Justice Patterson of the Supreme Court has approved the certificate of incorporation of the American Educational Art Institute, which was filed in the office of the County-Clerk yesterday. It has for its object the establishment and maintenance of an institution in Paris, France, for the culture and promotion of art among American women.

The institute is the outgrowth of a meeting held at Sherry's on April 29, when the matter was formally discussed. Miss Matilda Smedley is the originator and promoter of the plan, and to her is due the success which has followed. Miss Smedley first interested Mrs. Walden Pell, a wealthy American philanthropist, who has lived in Paris for thirty years, and a number of Parisians and Americans, and then came to New York last January. Prominent New Yorkers quickly became interested, and the American Educational and Art Institute in Paris became assured.

Nearly the entire amount necessary, \$250,000, has been raised, and the remainder will be secured by issuing bonds, which will be readily taken up on both sides of the water.

The site for the building in Paris has already been selected in the neighborhood of the Arc de Triomphe. The building will contain one hundred rooms, including dwelling rooms, lecture and class rooms, libraries, etc. The young women will be able to live at the institute and attend to their studies both there and elsewhere in Paris. A rule of the institution will be that five francs a day must cover all expenses, such as board, light and tuition. It is expected that in a short time the institution can be made self-sustaining. Large numbers of American women go yearly to Paris for the purpose of studying, and it is the desire of the friends of the new institute that as many of these students as wish may secure safety, comfort, economy and education by its aid. It will be under the management of a board of trustees divided into two sections, one being in Paris and one in New York.

It is expected that the institute building will be begun soon, and it is hoped that it will be ready for occupancy early next year. Miss Smedley was seen last night at her home by a Tribune reporter. After describing what has been done and telling what ready assistance she had found, both in New York and in Paris, Miss Smedley told of the objects of the institute:

"We do not wish," she said, "to encourage girls to enter upon a career so arduous and precarious without a reasonable prospect of success. None will be admitted to the institute who do not bring evidence of ability, both mental and physical, to warrant their undertaking such serious studies, and, for the protection of teachers in America and students abroad, applicants will be admitted only when indorsed by American schools and professors of recognized standing. Those having received scholarships will be assigned to such schools, colleges or art institutes as shall fill the requirements of the institute. During the summer holidays sketching and traveling parties will be formed, conducted by competent chaperons, and during these months the institute will be open to the American teachers and students who wish to avail themselves of its advantages temporarily.

"It should be clearly understood that the institute is for the benefit of the earnest and faithful student, who will receive the advantages of a cheerful and well-appointed home for the sum of five francs a day. It has been found that girls studying in Paris are likely to suffer quite as much from their lack of knowledge of their environments and lack of personal comfort as from lack of means. The institute will be on a liberal and non-sectarian basis."

Regarding this Mr. Rhead says:

"The influence of a large undertaking is not felt at once, but, as time goes on, grows in all directions by successful operation. Such probably will be the case with the Institute now contemplated and practically complete. I am fully aware of the large number of prominent and cultured people who are thoroughly in sympathy with the movement, still I should like to express from the modest standpoint of an ex-art student some ideas on this important step.

"Two-hundred and fifty-thousand dollars, with a like sum added to it by the Government, would be a nice beginning for a National Art Training School such as South Kensington Museum, where tuition is reasonably within the reach of all classes, and free scholarships are to be gained with comparative ease. Such an institution would act as a loadstone to the many American artists who have made their homes abroad; and the foreign professors of painting and music would just as soon come here to teach for short periods, with a better result to them than teaching in Paris, as their personality and work would be more widely advertised—such being their main object in teaching, to use their own words.

"Quite a number of prominent art teachers lend their names to this enterprise, for what reason they best know. Would any large body of learned men in France, England, Germany, Holland, or any European country, be willing to do this and neglect their own national education? Is not the time ripe to call a halt in this fostering and helping to prolong a nation's art, the greater part of which is both meritricious and bad? Take a dozen painters away from the Salon of any year—I mean the productions of the few men of high aims and fine work—and what a wilderness of painful scenes is left. I counted ninety pictures in last year's Salon not fit for men to see (that is, Americans with their own opinions and views) and what of the five hundred young women and the same number of men who witness and study

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this work; learning to swallow any noxious stuff and argue that it is art? The best French artists will come to America at periodical times for either money or fame. They have done and are doing so, and will do it still more if such institutions are built and made perfect for them at home. How they smile with satisfaction and go on putting up their prices, at the same time cajoling visitors. When any of them see a painting like Abbey's 'Holy Grail' they are mute, but think, and say aloud, 'truly you are a wonderful people,' and we think it is praise for our greatness, and are satisfied.

"As an art student I have seen both in London and Paris students of both sexes do what they would not do here in New York, live in their own stuffy little studios, cook their own food and exist on fifty cents a day, go to dirty little restaurants to get a course dinner with wine for twenty cents, and think it glorious. The young men harness themselves to a pushcart, hired at six cents an hour, and move their belongings from one place to another, and do many other little things, none of them really harmful, but hardly edifying to the citizens of the proud nation that sends its sons and daughters abroad to study the fine arts. Not all do this, but many have to, and some that can afford to live better do not, for good fellowship's sake.

"Later, as an artist commissioned to make illustrations for magazines, I have seen men working on hopelessly in poverty, vice, and absinthe, who started from home strong in mind and body, with high aims and noble ideals. They absolutely refuse to leave, though they would very quickly earn a competent income at home. Though possessed of great abilities they are broken in body, mind, and pocket. There are some who return and are a credit to their country. They are the few who pass through the mire safely. It is of no use to mince matters; artists and students alike, they know it, and know I can substantiate my statements by cold and serious facts. Look at the long list of French artists, authors, musicians, who have died young in the last decade. Inquire the cause of their early demise and the answer is their looseness of living, 'Bohemianism,' and lack of general comfort. Pages and pages could be written farther to support the assertion that the institute could do better work right here. Hundreds of men and women come from the West to study art in New York, finding out later that Paris is cheaper, and tuition one-half the cost. The difference is sometimes only apparent. Art materials are the same, but board is no cheaper if the living is respectably decent. Omnibuses and cabs are infinitely cheaper, wearing apparel is not cheaper; if it is, the material is worse. Unless a student lives within a stone's throw of the Art Student's League it costs ten or twenty cents a day for car fare. In Paris they walk the distance and enjoy it. The League student's expenses are at least fifteen dollars a week, for tuition, materials, and board. The majority do it in Paris on five dollars, by living

in a room which they call a studio, and by buying second-hand furniture, which they sell again at a reasonable reduction to some newcomer.

"What is Dvorak doing here? Would other musicians come if they had an invitation? Why are Abbey, Sargent, Whistler, Vedder, and a host of our artists, abroad all the time? Merely because they are not induced to stay. They find appreciation among strangers, or from their own countrymen who visit them in such vast numbers, to pay them more money abroad than they would if the artists stayed at home. What other nation is there whose artists are scattered all over the globe, helping to swell the glory of any country's art except their own? A prominent English artist with whom I conversed thought Chase was a Frenchman, Du Mond he was sure was of that nationality, simply because their work had appeared in French galleries and journals.

"The prime object of this pilgrimage to Paris—and more of the female sex will want to go, if encouraged—is 'art atmosphere.' (What is that? The only atmosphere Inness wanted was God's clear sky, grass, and trees.) There are very few women who become artists of distinction in any country, considering the enormous number who study art. The late Rev. Mr. M. Newell, whose work will never be forgotten by many students, and whose body lies by his own request in the cemetery of Montparnasse, to be, as he said, always near them, remarked once that from one hundred and fifty to two hundred young women went to Paris every year, and that he thought there were five hundred always there. What are the results? Art is a long and difficult journey, with success only for the few who have exceptional talent. If many could only be persuaded to see it in that light! Art may be a romantic study; it is also hard, grinding toil, and competition now makes it impossible for any except the fortunate few to earn enough to live on.

"This Du Maurier novel has had a bad influence in the interest it has evoked (but which is happily declining) in 'the art atmosphere.' I mean that young people will want to study art for the fun there is in it. A young person who hopes to go this fall said, 'The first thing I do will be to visit Little Billee's studio.'

"I know these words will be thought narrow-minded, possibly ignorant, and rather late. But in the first place I argue that art is of no nationality, can be studied, fostered anywhere, here as well as in Paris, particularly if a new wing were added to the Metropolitan Museum, at the city's expense, and a director without salary chosen from the most prominent artists, and a number of professors (also without salary), both American and foreign, and fees kept reasonably within the reach of all in connection with an Institute where board and lodgings were reasonable. Second, I have passed through it all. I was four years a national scholar at South Kensington, three years in Paris, ten in New York. I believe George Frederick Watts and Puvis de Chavannes to be the greatest artists in Europe, and Elihu Vedder and

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Edwin Abbey in America, because their works are the purest and the highest, though they rarely paint sacred subjects. I should be glad to see a concentration of art in America, new, vital, and free from vice, untrammelled by any European influence. If the people are willing to interest themselves, and the Government is not, let any benefits go to foster and encourage home study, and the public will then buy more American art.

"In The Tribune of June 23 Miss Smedley says, 'None will be admitted to the Institute who do not bring evidence of ability.' What will become of those who have not that ability and who are determined to try it? In a year or two they will return disheartened, with their eyes opened a little wider as to what is required to make an artist or musician. Make it possible for women to study art and live cheaply in America, and fewer will want to go abroad. Miss Smedley's plan is a good one, but in the wrong place, because a gathering together of students and artists makes the very art atmosphere that they long for. Students admit that the criticisms made by the teachers are secondary, that it is the stronger students' work that is the influence which is so valuable.

"Will students still go and suffer all kinds of annoyances? The time will soon come when art in America will be superior to that in France. What will become of the Institute then?"

Most of my readers will doubtless take exception to many things Mr. Rhead says, still he raises some questions that sooner or later may have to be met in American art. I believe in the great importance of foreign study as a part of art education, but only as a part, and not as a goal towards which to strive as though it contained all truth.

The question has been asked before. Is our students' work, and therefore our coming art, more under the influence of European painters than is necessary, even from the least National and most artistic point of view?